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Review of Hassan Melehy, "Kerouac: Language, Poetics, and Territory"

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Hassan Melehy. *Kerouac: Language, Poetics, and Territory*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. 255pp.

“It isn’t writing at all – it’s typing” Truman Capote famously quipped about Jack Kerouac. Capote’s evaluation epitomized the attitude that governed the reception of Kerouac’s works for decades, namely that Kerouac’s texts were not literature and therefore not worthy of literary study. One critic even claims that Kerouac is the most biographied writer in the history of American literature (James Jones)—a preponderance that signals the refusal to read Kerouac’s texts for the ways in which they move beyond documentation into the realm of the literary. Beginning in the 1980s, readers began to challenge the assessment exemplified by Capote’s famous quip. Tim Hunt’s *Kerouac’s Crooked Road* published in 1981 ushered in a critical practice that sought to understand Kerouac’s literary strategies. It is in Hunt’s tradition that Hassan Melehy’s *Kerouac: Language, Poetics, and Territory* takes shape: Melehy’s text focuses on Kerouac’s poetics. Melehy’s work differs from those that come before by grounding these poetics in Kerouac’s cultural and linguistic background. While some literary critics rescue Kerouac from the impulse to collapse textuality into biography by erasing Kerouac’s cultural specificity, Melehy instead traces the impact of his French-Canadian background on a formal and a thematic level, finding in it a source of Kerouac’s literary innovations. In its attention to Kerouac’s cultural background, Melehy’s critical intervention joins the recent publication of Jack Kerouac’s French writings (*La vie est d’hommage* edited by Jean-Christophe Cloutier) to point to the fundamental importance of Kerouac’s biculturalism to his literary project.

Melehy’s readings follow the chronology of Kerouac’s writings, privileging those texts that contribute most to the evolution of the poetics that “ensue[s] from the relationship to his native language and heritage”(18). He begins with Kerouac’s first novel *The Town and the City*, which most of the critical commentary distinguishes from Kerouac’s later literary innovations. Melehy instead finds the first step in the development of Kerouac’s aesthetics, “this novel represents a big part of the itinerary to spontaneous prose”(30) and of Kerouac’s attempts to create a poetics truer to reality, one “that doesn’t distance itself from reality through excessive conventionalization—one that takes reality as its necessary starting point and responds primarily to it”(25). Kerouac’s sense of disappointment with *The Town and the City* spurs him to innovate,

innovations that lead to him to the spontaneous prose of *On the Road*. Melehy similarly finds in *The Town and the City* the germination of Kerouac's thematics of exile. This novel "is effectively an allegory of settlement, scattering, and deracination"(23) and as such establishes the "two poles that continue to operate throughout Kerouac's work, the mournful knowledge of the loss of origins and the ecstasy of wandering that this loss precipitates"(23).

Chapter Two explores Kerouac's iconic text *On the Road*. While this work is the least connected to Kerouac's cultural background in the critical commentary, Melehy argues that it is nevertheless deeply indebted to it. The New York Public Library's Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of American and English Literature recently opened archives (2006) reveal that Kerouac wrote an initial draft of *On the Road* in French (45). "In light of this manuscript, critics, scholars, and other commentators should simply stop regarding *On the Road* as a mere memoir or autobiographical novel representing a bohemian's or drop-out's or countercultural hero's peregrinations. It is, rather, an exercise in a poetics of exile—the result of cultural displacement that becomes the quest for the many cultural displacements that constitute the United States"(51-52). For Melehy, it is Kerouac's attempts to write a French Canadian novel in French that brings him to develop this poetics. "Kerouac takes advantage of his linguistic position as an outsider to English...If he begins in...French-Canadian French...he is already working in a language that by its nature refuses fixed forms and also spawns expressions for the new realities that it encounters in migration"(50). This transterritorial vernacular disrupting Kerouac's English finds its thematic manifestation in Kerouac's embrace of the road, "the very affirmation of a life necessarily unsettled"(53). The early French drafts make clear "the close connections in Kerouac's poetics between his unsettled Franco-American identity and his ancestral ties: the road is the uncertain way back to cultural origins as well as the inevitable path of exile, and writing is both depiction and extension of cultural vagabondage"(51).

In Chapter Three, Melehy argues that the literary explorations that began in *On the Road* flourish in *Visions of Cody*. Two techniques in particular grow out of Kerouac's experiments begun in *On the Road*: improvisation drawn from his understanding of jazz, "His interest in discovering, through exercises in improvisation, a rhetoric that creates space to admit into dominant literature previously unrecognized idioms, and more broadly social realities, reflects a

detailed grasp of jazz improvisation as a social, cultural, and aesthetic set of practices”(92), and Edward D. White Jr.’s idea of sketching, “a writing technique in which language becomes the very interaction between reality and psyche”(94). It is these two techniques along with Kerouac’s “detour into French”(117) that shape Kerouac’s experiments in writing for the rest of his career.

The final two chapters of Melehy’s text examine in turn works that focus specifically on French Canadian community and identity: *Dr. Sax: Faust Part Three* and *Satori in Paris*. In these chapters, Melehy continues his excavation of the importance of Kerouac’s biculturalism to his entire literary endeavor. *Dr. Sax* continues Kerouac’s pressure on literary conventions. Written “directly from the French in [his] head”(120), Kerouac attempts to bring “writing to bear on an exposure of lived reality”(120). Paralleling these formal innovations, Kerouac’s rewriting of Goethe seeks to push “the limits of cultural stability”(135), thematically undermining the “West” “with an opening of settled culture to all that its adherence to stability might previously have excluded”(141). *Satori in Paris*, Kerouac’s most concentrated treatment of nostalgia and identity, similarly embraces “fragmentary identity”(157) and movement. In this, Melehy finds the essence of Kerouac’s undertaking, “Kerouac’s entire literary project has turned on a tension between searching for origins and, as the search is in progress, renouncing it as futile and instead embracing the encounters that occur on the way”(170).

Melehy’s *Kerouac: Language, Poetics, and Territory* is an innovative exploration of Kerouac’s poetics, exposing the importance of the specificity of Jack Kerouac’s own French-Canadian cultural background to Kerouac’s “energetic reformation of American literature as North American, with suggestions for reaching a global scope”(179-180).

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